

Orange County Natural Areas Inventory

OCCONEECHEE MOUNTAIN

Site Number: E07

Size: 166 acres

Site Significance: State

USGS Quads: Efland, Hillsborough

SIGNIFICANT FEATURES: Occoneechee Mountain is one of the most important natural areas in the Triangle. The 2004 update to this report combines two distinct communities on Occoneechee Mountain—the lower, more mesic north-facing slope and the upper slopes and summit, which the original (1988) inventory had treated as separate sites. The north-facing slope includes the area traditionally known locally as the Panther's Den.

Mesic Slopes Portion

The Panther's Den ravine has long been recognized as state significant by naturalists because of the several disjunct plant species that reach their easternmost limits at this site. These include the Bradley's spleenwort (*Asplenium bradleyi*) and wild sarsaparilla (*Aralia nudicaulis*); the mountain spleenwort (*Asplenium montanum*) was formerly thought to have its eastern limit here but was discovered further downstream (E13) during the course of this study. Catawba rhododendron (*Rhododendron catawbiense*) is present atop the steep rock outcrop adjacent to the ravine, while along the slope ascending from the Panther's Den is the best mountain laurel-galax community in the Triangle. This population of the regionally rare galax (*Galax aphylla*) is strikingly large, and covers a far greater area than any other galax population in the county. The significantly rare sweet pinesap (*Monotropsis odorata*) also occurs in this community, along with the regionally rare large witch-alder (*Fothergilla major*). Interrupted fern (*Osmunda claytoniana*) inhabits wet areas at the base of the slope; this is the only Piedmont record for this montane species. One other unusual montane species that has been reported for this area but not confirmed is the purple fringeless orchid (*Platanthera peramoena*).

As part of the overall massif of Occoneechee Mountain, this area forms an important wildlife reservoir; its position along the Eno further enhances its value since the valley of the Eno is one of the most significant wildlife corridors in the county. Among the many animal species observed here, the most significant is the Cooper's hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*), which is state-listed as a special concern breeding bird. Since the individual seen at this site was an adult and the observation was made during the middle of the breeding season, it is relatively safe to assume it was nesting either on the lower slopes of Occoneechee or the adjacent riparian strip along the Eno. An animal more closely associated with the montane community of plants is the regionally-rare sumo mite (*Allothrombium* sp.), which likewise appears to be disjunct within our area.

Dry Slopes and Summit

The summit of Occoneechee Mountain is the highest point in Orange County, and in the entire Triangle Region. Rising over 350 feet from the Eno, the mountain presents the most dramatic ridgeline in the area and the view from the summit towards historic Hillsborough is equally unmatched. From a biological viewpoint, the most significant aspect of this rise is that it encompasses a range of montane community types, from the cool, moist community at the Panther's Den to the dry Virginia pine-heath-bracken fern and chestnut oak communities